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TAGS: [PREL](#) [GG](#)

SUBJECT: A/S FRIED'S MEETING WITH GEORGIAN FOREIGN MINISTER
BEZHUASHVILI

Classified By: Ambassador John F. Tefft for reasons 1.4(b) & (d).

Summary

1. (C) Georgian Foreign Minister Gela Bezhuashvili told A/S Fried October 18 that recent Russian statements and actions indicated that Russia had decided to launch an all-out diplomatic assault on Georgia, trying to marginalize the U.S. from the Group of Friends, targeting GUAM, and working to divide the EU on Georgia. Bezhuashvili said he hoped to resume discussions with Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov on the margins of the November 1 BSEC ministerial, and he expressed openness to a German idea of Parliament Speaker Burjanadze traveling to Moscow. Fried stressed that confrontations with Russia worked against Georgia's long-term interests, in large part by raising concerns in Europe, and he questioned whether Georgia should invest so much of its political capital on the issue where Russia has the most leverage: the separatist conflicts. Bezhuashvili said the Georgian government was very worried about a Russian-prompted gas crisis this winter. He said he and Energy Minister Gilauri would travel to Iran in the coming days to discuss buying Iranian gas if Russian and Azeri options prove impossible. Fried urged caution in dealing with Iran. End Summary.

Relations with Russia

2. (C) Fried began the lunch meeting by stressing U.S. concerns about Georgia's deteriorating relations with Russia and the negative effect this deterioration was having on European views of Georgia. He asked Bezhuashvili where he saw the situation going. Bezhuashvili noted that Russian President Putin had recently been quoted as saying he would like to hear from his military and civilian advisors how "protected" Georgia was by its patrons abroad. Bezhuashvili said it was his opinion that Russia had decided to launch an all-out diplomatic offensive to test Georgia's international support. Examples of this include the Russian efforts to get a reference to the Georgian operation in the Kodori Gorge into the recent UN Security Council resolution on Abkhazia, working to marginalize the U.S. from other members of the Group of Friends, targeting GUAM through approaches to Moldova and possibly Ukraine, working to divide the EU, and even attempting to influence Washington through public relations firms. Nevertheless, Bezhuashvili thought the Russians had made mistakes in this campaign, especially in allowing xenophobic rhetoric and deporting large numbers of Georgians from Russia. Noting that one Georgian citizen had recently died after being held for twenty days awaiting deportation, Bezhuashvili said the Georgians had been working with lawyers on a strong interstate case to take to the European Court of Human Rights.

3. (C) Bezhuashvili said he had had difficulty contacting

Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov over the last two weeks, and he understood from his Azeri counterpart that Lavrov had indicated he needed "some time" before resuming dialogue with Georgia. Bezhuashvili said he intended to travel to Moscow for the November 1 BSEC Ministerial -- an event he would not normally attend -- in order to meet with Lavrov. He added, however, that Lavrov had all but admitted in previous conversations that the MFA was not at the center of Russian policy making on Georgia. Bezhuashvili said he could only guess that the FSB, GRU, and Presidential Administration had taken the lead. He said that in the past Lavrov had often been unable to answer his questions about what Russia wanted from Georgia, although Lavrov had assured him Russia would not annex Georgian territory. Bezhuashvili said his deputy had recently asked Lavrov at a CIS Ministerial in Minsk when Russian Embassy personnel would return to Tbilisi. Bezhuashvili told Fried that Georgia would be ready to help the Russians find a face-saving way to return. He said Christoph Heusgen, foreign policy advisor to German Chancellor Merkel, had recently told the Georgians that Merkel had suggested to Putin that Georgian Parliament Speaker Burjanadze visit Moscow, and Putin had agreed. Bezhuashvili said this was not a bad idea, as a follow-up to his own meeting with Lavrov at BSEC. Bezhuashvili said Georgian behavior toward Russia over the past two weeks had been careful and responsible. Fried asked about Defense Minister Okruashvili's reported comments to the press that war with Russia was inevitable; Bezhuashvili said he talked to Okruashvili himself and this report was a fabrication.

14. (C) Fried said there was concern in Washington that Russia's efforts to isolate Georgia and to prevent its integration with the West were having some success, and that European governments had been greatly concerned by the confrontation over the Russian spies. Fried said that he too

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had been angered by the xenophobic Russian response to the incident, but he stressed that Georgia was still on the tactical defensive, playing on a field laid out by the Russians. He said that Georgia faced a choice -- previously faced by the Baltic states and others in the former Communist bloc -- between the short-term gratification of quarreling with Russia and the achievement of long-term goals. He stressed that the Europeans feared being drawn into Russian-Georgian conflicts. He added that there are certain issues where the Russians have leverage: the economy (although that is a wasting asset) and the frozen conflicts. Fried said that, given this, he questioned the Georgians' decision to make the conflicts their top priority; it was the one issue where the Russians had the most opportunity to thwart them and to generate crises that would weaken Western support for Georgia.

15. (C) Fried asked Bezhuashvili if he was happy with developments over the past six months. Bezhuashvili said yes and no -- "maybe more no than yes" -- but argued that some positives had come out of the spy scandal. He said the Western media and governments could now no longer ignore Russian human rights violations and the parallels between the current treatment of Georgians in Russia to the treatment of Jews decades ago. Deputy Foreign Minister Batu Kutelia, who until recently was Georgia's intelligence chief, said the publicity given to the spying arrests also had an internal purpose: to deter the growing number of Georgians who accepted money from the Russians in exchange for information.

Separately, at a dinner that night, the new head of the intelligence services, Ana Zhvania, argued that the internal threat to Georgia from Russian spies -- and those whom they pay off -- is growing and that the public handling of the spy case was needed to act as a deterrent to domestic spying by Georgians.

The Conflicts

16. (C) Bezhuashvili agreed the conflicts were a weak point

for Georgia, although he thought the Russians would continue to create problems with the conflicts even if Georgia put less emphasis on them. Or alternatively, he speculated that Russia might begin to propagandize within Georgia that the Saakashvili government was downplaying its most visible pledge: to re-unite the country. Fried agreed that Georgia could not be passive on the conflicts, but he advised focusing on areas where the Europeans agreed and where there was some chance of progress, such as the donors' economic rehabilitation project in South Ossetia, and efforts to internationalize the peacekeepers and police. Bezhuashvili said the government was in a permanent dialogue with Parliament, which was pushing for Georgia to end Russian peacekeeping. Bezhuashvili said that in his view it is not the right time for such a decision, but added that it could not be stopped forever. He asked if the U.S. thought the Georgian call for new negotiating formats for the conflicts -- especially South Ossetia -- was counterproductive. Fried said he agreed that current formats were unbalanced, but an endless confrontation over them was not in the Georgians' interest. Turning to Kodori, Fried said the U.S. did not object in principle to the Georgian operation, although the violations of the 1994 Moscow Agreement that accompanied it had hurt the Georgians in the UN Security Council resolution debate and should not be repeated. He said Georgia now had the opportunity to make Kodori a real success.

17. (C) On Abkhazia, Fried said one asset was that de facto president Bagapsh did not appear to be a "100 percent" Russian creature. Bezhuashvili and Kutelia disagreed, noting that while it was true that Bagapsh came from a more Abkhaz nationalist background than others in the de facto administration, given the tremendous Russian leverage in Abkhazia his actions were in practice no different than his more pro-Russian colleagues. Kutelia noted that even Beslan Butba, a prominent Abkhaz businessman and member of the de facto parliament who (despite living primarily on Moscow) is personally anti-Russian, told Kutelia earlier this year that he was forced to break off his contacts with Georgian officials.

The Politics of Gas

18. (C) Bezhuashvili said the government was greatly concerned about a winter gas crisis. While he had doubts that the Russians would again cut off the gas completely, he predicted they would insist on a large increase in price. Bezhuashvili confirmed that the Russians were pressing Azerbaijan not to sell gas to Georgia. He said the Azeris had asked Georgia for "more time to assess" after the Russians had told them they would lose the same amount of gas from Russia that they

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sell to Georgia. Fried told Bezhuashvili to exercise great caution if Georgia gets involved in gas talks with Iran. Bezhuashvili said that in fact he and Energy Minister Gilauri were likely to travel to Iran October 21 or 22, assuming they received a positive report from a Georgian technical team arriving in Iran October 19. He said Georgia had wanted to send only Gilauri, but the Iranians had insisted on Bezhuashvili as well, and had urged Georgia to characterize the visit as broader than only energy issues. Bezhuashvili told Fried that gas was the only issue Georgia was interested in discussing, and added that any purchases from Iran would be conditional on Russian and Azeri sources being unworkable, and on the Iranian price being reasonable. He said he recognized that the Iranians could be colluding with Russia, but explained that circumstances obligated the Georgian government to explore all alternatives.

19. (U) A/S Fried cleared this message.
TEFFT